

ALL FOR A GREY BERET

by Master Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.

The accident happened so suddenly, he doesn't remember the exact thoughts that raced through his mind as he plunged the last 20 to 30 feet while rappelling a 100-foot rock outcrop in Colorado Springs, Colo.

He just remembers the red rocks at the Garden of the Gods zooming by him much too quickly, and the loud rush of air in his ears.

After falling the equivalent of a two-story building, he instinctively parachute-rolled upon landing. Despite successfully completing a maneuver used to spread the impact equally across his side, his 205-pound body crumpled into the ground.

Both his feet shattered upon contact with a cement sidewalk. Medical experts said there was no way he was going to rehabilitate himself enough to stay in the Air Force.

by Master Sgt. Val Gempis



Weather specialist battles to keep his career after a bone-crushing fall

Although just lucky to be alive, Tech. Sgt. Christopher DeCorte set out to prove everybody wrong. He not only wanted to remain in the Air Force, he was determined to mend his broken body enough to wear the grey beret that identifies the special operations weather career field.

Always a GI

His brother, Mark, always remembers Chris as thinking a little differently than others, even at an early age.

"I don't know where he got his ideas, but ever since he was a kid, we painted our faces and enjoyed the woods," said Tech. Sgt. Mark DeCorte, an aeromedical evacuation specialist stationed at Brooks City-Base, Texas. One such incident nearly got the two brothers in trouble.

X-rays show the hardware that held the feet of Tech. Sgt. Christopher DeCorte's foot bones in place following a 20- to 30-foot rock-climbing fall at the Garden of the Gods near Colorado Springs, Colo.

Chris' father, retired Master Sgt. Dennis DeCorte, remembers the incident well. While stationed at Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, Master Sgt. DeCorte had to rescue his sons from German officials after someone reported seeing terrorists in the woods around a high-rise apartment. It turned out to be Chris and his buddies dressed in cammo paint and military uniforms engaged in a mock war with toy weapons. Their father had to explain that his boys were only playing; that they weren't terrorists, as reported. They were merely overzealous Boy Scouts.

Sergeant DeCorte was always afraid Chris would join the Army.

"When he learned that the Air Force didn't do all the outdoor stuff he enjoyed — fishing, hunting and all things outdoors — he almost went into the Army," he said.

Eager to enlist

But somehow, Sergeant DeCorte encouraged his son to enlist in the Air Force. Chris was so eager to join, he skipped the ceremony that would have made him an Eagle Scout — the highest honor in Scouting. Instead, he attended basic training. He joined two weeks after high school, and was midway through basic training when he turned 18 years old at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. He enlisted "open general," allowing the Air Force to pick a career best suited for him. He listed weather as his last selection. In what turned out to be a fortunate twist of fate, the Air Force placed him in the weather career field.

After weather training, he spent his first four years at Plattsburg Air Force Base, N.Y. However, he bored easily. While in weather forecasting school, he volunteered to be in para-weather, the former name of what is now the special operations weather career field. The physical challenge intrigued him. He knew it was the career field for him.

He received orders to Fort Carson, in Colorado Springs, with the 10th Special Forces Group. He learned to work with the Army, parachute, use small boats, rappel, fast-rope from helicopters, long-distance swim, survive in extreme weather conditions and operate foreign weapons — everything he dreamed of doing as a child. No longer was he playing Army in a forest in Germany — he was living it.

After successfully completing training, he deployed to Italy to support Bosnia operations in 1996. As a special operations weather specialist, he supported combat

search and rescue missions that used special operations aircraft. He collected data, assisted in mission planning, generated mission-tailored target forecasts and conducted strategic weather reconnaissance. Without this information, leaders are unable to properly plan for air missions. He also briefed small Green Beret teams, and sometimes even Navy SEAL teams, before they deployed on operations. Although Army Special Forces units were his main customers, other services relied on his expertise, as well.

When Sergeant DeCorte wasn't working, he enjoyed an active off-duty life — white-water rafting, hiking and rock climbing. In July 1998, while still stationed at Fort Carson, he was rock climbing on a weekend. It's a skill he needed if he wanted to keep up with special operations Airmen in remote mountainous areas around the world.

Then, his anchor system failed, letting rope slip through his harness. His left foot struck the cement sidewalk so hard it permanently elongated it half an inch. His ankles suffered severe tissue damage. In a few days, the pads on the heels of his feet turned black and fell off.

He was sent to a nearby civilian hospital where orthopedic trauma team members wanted to amputate his feet. They didn't want him to have to endure constant pain for the rest of his life. For them, amputation was a quality of life issue for their patient.

"If I was going to lose my feet, I would have given up," said his brother, Mark. "But Chris never takes 'no'

for an answer. For him, everything is heart. He knows his heart."

"I thought for sure he'd never walk again," said his father, a retired Air Force aeromedical evacuation technician. "In my opinion, I thought he was going to be in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, but he's not a quitter. He never was."

When Col. (Dr.) Robert Allen heard of Sergeant DeCorte's plight, the 720th Special Tactics Group physician felt obligated to help.

"I was told one of our guys was smashed up in Colorado Springs and that they were planning on amputating his feet," Colonel Allen said. "Fortunately, I knew an Army colleague who specialized in this sort of thing."

Maj. (Dr.) Rob Harris, an Army orthopedic surgeon, assembled an extremity trauma unit and flew Sergeant DeCorte to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

Before the operation, officials visited Sergeant DeCorte and told him the Air Force would medically discharge him. At the very least, he'd have to wear prosthetics, which would make him physically incapable to accomplish his job in the Air Force.

Every other day, for three weeks, doctors operated on his ankles and feet. They removed damaged tissue and inserted bolts and pins, trying to piece together his shattered bones and tendons.

Slow, painful comeback

After the operations, he recuperated in the hospital for two weeks. When he left, his legs were skinnier than his arms. He could wrap his hand around his leg and nearly touch his thumb to his middle finger. During six months in a wheelchair, he started his own therapy: flutter kicks and air bicycle motions. As soon as doctors removed his stitches, he swam constantly.

The doctors tired of him asking when he was going to jump again. Major Harris told him that it was likely that he'd never again get back into his former career field.

"I wanted to do what they said I couldn't do," he said.

While still recovering, Sergeant DeCorte was sent to Fort Bragg, N.C., where he was told that once he healed, he'd be placed back on jump status. His dream was in grasp, but he had doubts. What if he landed wrong? Would that result in an amputation?

Although rehabilitation services were offered, Sergeant DeCorte resolved to mend himself. His then

girlfriend, now wife, Kristin, witnessed his fall and has been by his side ever since. "Through thick and thin she stayed with me, inspiring me all the way," he said.

At the 15th month of his rehabilitation, doctors removed the pins and bolts in his ankles. The effects were devastating. The operation sent him back to taking baby steps. It took him another nine months to get back to where he was before doctors removed the hardware. But once he worked his way there, the Air Force gave him his shot.

His first big test came when he was told to accomplish a night assault training jump carrying 80 pounds of equipment.

"I've done harder jumps, but I knew that if I could do that, I'd gain confidence to do others," he said. When he finished the jump, he called his father.

"When he told me what he did, I had goose bumps because he had achieved a major milestone," his father said. "He was quite elated when he called me that afternoon."

After that jump, he accomplished five more in four months. Then, after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, he was deployed to Afghanistan where he eliminated any remaining doubts he might have had about his ability to accomplish his special operations mission.

In 2002, he received orders to South Korea, where he was the current operations noncommissioned officer in charge. He was also in charge of the squadron's physical training program and was a member of the base's football team. Although not in the job he wanted, he was told that since he had proved himself fit at Fort Bragg and in Afghanistan, he'd eventually return to the special operations career field he so loved. While on leave, he even ran a couple miles with his father.

"I was surprised he kept up with me," his father said. "He waddled, but he kept up. I'm sure he was in a lot of pain, but he had all the stamina I had and more."

Although Major Allen was surprised at Sergeant DeCorte's recovery, he told his patient to quit running. It was creating too much stress on his ankles and feet. The surgery left him with hardly any cartilage; running was deteriorating what little he had left. The average person has 5 mm of cartilage in their ankles. Sergeant DeCorte had 1 mm.

In July 2002, his jump status was approved.

Today he's a team leader of a special operations weather team stationed at a base in the eastern United States.

He passed his latest physical training test with a 78 percent out of 100. He ran a mile and a half in 13:30

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez



A combat weather specialist gently floats down during parachute practice at Hurlburt Field, Fla. Most of their airborne training is done at Fort Benning, Ga.

minutes, and did 83 pushups and 61 sit-ups, each in a minute.

"Not bad for a broke guy," Sergeant DeCorte said.

Still today, now Colonel Allen is impressed with Sergeant DeCorte's recovery.

"Although the doctors did an amazing job, the hero in this story is Sergeant DeCorte," the doctor said. "With extremely bad trauma cases, it's hard for patients to get back to a functional level. Although we have everything in place for rehabilitation, patients have to want it themselves. In this case, there was no lack of dedication. If he didn't want it as bad as he did, he wouldn't be where he is. I was impressed with his character."

The special operations career field is a quiet one. When you live in the shadows, you remain out of the spotlight. Although every combat weather specialist knows of Sergeant DeCorte, he's slowly returning to the shadows from whence he came, to a place where he belongs. ♡

Combat weather training

Do you have what it takes to be a special operations combat weather team member?

After weather specialists prove they are competent as five-level weather craftsman, they must complete the following training:

- Combat Weather Team Operations Course, Keesler Air Force Base, Miss.
- U.S. Army Basic Airborne Course, Fort Benning, Ga.
- Combat Survival Training, Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash.
- Water Survival Training, Hurlburt Field, Fla.
- Parachuting, Hurlburt

For more information about becoming a special operations combat weather team member, send an e-mail to afsoc.dow@hurlburt.af.mil.